

The Peale Family:

CREATION OF AN AMERICAN LEGACY, 1770-1870



The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

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is a landmark exhibition celebrating the achievements of one extraordinary family of painters. This presentation of over 180 paintings features the work of seven men and three women, each of whom created paintings that were remarkable for their time and that remain among the most beloved in all American art. What is more, the Peales' rich collective legacy of portraiture, history painting, and still-life subjects is an eloquent and detailed chronicle of the most notable people and events of the republic's early history. Although the works of the male members are well known, the exhibition reveals that the female members of the family also excelled and achieved a status unparalleled by women artists in America. Visitors to the exhibition will be able to see long-familiar paintings from major museums and private collections – works that rarely travel. These include such celebrated paintings as Charles Willson Peale's charming *The Staircase Group* (FIG. 1) of 1795, from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, a delightful portrayal of the painter's young sons and an amusing exercise in *trompe l'oeil* painting; his entertaining *Exhumation of the Mastodon* (FIG. 2) of 1806, from the Baltimore City Life Museums; and Rembrandt Peale's beautiful and touching portrait of his younger brother, *Rubens Peale with Geranium* (FIG. 9), of 1801, from the National Gallery of Art.



The Example of the “Father”

Nearly every member of the extended Peale family dabbled in the arts, but under the influence of Charles Willson Peale, the ten most prominent Peales defined artistic conventions in Philadelphia at the end of the 18th century and dominated the region's art life through the next 100 years. Theirs is the story of changing artistic taste and of the varied interest and complex interrelationships within a close-knit group of extraordinarily gifted individuals (FRONT COVER AND FIG. 3)

Charles Willson Peale, born in Queen Anne's County, Maryland in 1741, the son of a teacher, was a man of unbridled enthusiasm for painting. Having received instruction in the colonies from portraitists John Hesselius in Maryland and John Singleton Copley in Boston, he demonstrated his grand ambitions by traveling to London in 1766 to study in the studio of American artist Benjamin West, painter to King

George III as well as president of the Royal Academy of Art. Under West, Peale gained fluency in the conventions of the stylish grand manner of portraiture and narrative painting based on prototypes from antiquity and European old masters. Returning home, he passed along his knowledge and enthusiasm to his younger brother, James, and made clear his hopes for his offspring by naming several of his children, both the sons and daughters, after painters: Rembrandt, Rubens, Raphaelle, Titian and Angelica Kauffmann.

Peale moved from Annapolis to Philadelphia, then the cultural and political center of the colonies, in 1776, bringing his skills as an artist to the aid of the revolution. Following the War of Independence, Peale became one of the first painters to portray the new nation's war heroes and leaders. He painted George Washington as both a military general and President and portrayed other luminaries as well, including America's greatly admired French ally, the Marquis de Lafayette; Thomas Jefferson; Captain Joseph Brandt, Chief of the Mohawks; and, later, General Andrew Jackson.

In 1786, Peale established his museum in Philadelphia, his celebration of the young republic through specimens of animal, bird, plant life, and relics — such as mastodon bones — from the country's ancient past, as well as an extensive portrait gallery of America's notables, which grew to over 250 subjects. The museum occupied Peale for the next 40 years and represented one of the artist's most important achievements; his pioneering effort to popularize art and intellectual pursuits in America as true expressions of the glory of democracy.



FIGURE 2
Charles Willson Peale
Exhumation of the Mastodon, 1805-08
Oil on canvas, 50 x 62 1/2 in.
The Peale Museum,
Baltimore City Life Museums

FIGURE 1
Charles Willson Peale
“The Staircase Group”: Raphaelle and Titian Ramsay Peale, 1795
Oil on canvas, 69 x 39 1/2 in.
Philadelphia Museum of Art; The George W. Elkins Collection

An Extraordinary Family

Charles Willson Peale was the father of 17 children; four of his sons were painters. *Raphaelle Peale* (1774–1825), the oldest child to survive infancy, defied the popular taste for portraits and made still-life painting his specialty, creating some of the most beautiful examples in American art. *Rembrandt Peale* (1778–1860), the second son, succeeded his father as one of the most sought-after portraitists of his day and established his own museum in Baltimore. *Rubens Peale* (1784–1865), the fourth son, managed his father's Philadelphia Museum and his brother's in Baltimore. Later he founded his own in New York City; and dabbled in still life painting as an extension of his interest in natural history. *Titian Ramsay Peale II* (1799–1885), the youngest, was an explorer, naturalist, and artist whose zoological illustrations rivaled those of John James Audubon. His early work in photography contributed to interest in and development of the new medium.

There were distinguished painters in Peale's extended family as well. Peale's youngest brother, *James* (1749–1831), became a highly-skilled painter of miniature portraits on ivory and the only rival to Raphaelle Peale in the area of still-life painting in the early years of the 19th century. *Charles Peale Polk* (1767–1822), the orphaned son of Charles Willson Peale's

sister, was raised and trained by his uncle and also became a highly successful portrait painter. Like his cousin Rubens, Polk followed a non-academic approach that deviated from his training with his uncle and developed an original style all his own.

Several Peale daughters were among the first acknowledged women painters in America. *Angelica Kauffmann Peale* (1775–1853), daughter of Charles Willson Peale (named after his favorite female painter), had been instructed in drawing by her father and enjoyed a close relationship with him. *Sarah Miriam Peale* (1800–1885), daughter of James Peale, was the most celebrated of the Peale women, painting portraits and still lifes through the first decades of the 18th century. In 1818, Sarah and her sister *Anna Claypoole Peale*

(1791–1878), a gifted miniature painter, were elected to membership in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the first women artists to be so honored. Another sister, *Margareta Angelica Peale* (1795–1882), also excelled at still life painting. *Harriet Cary Peale* (c. 1800–1869) was trained as a painter by Rembrandt and became his second wife. Nearly everything known by her today is in subject and style inspired by her Peale in-laws (FIG. 10). Rembrandt's daughter, *Rosalba Carriera Peale* (1799–1874), was a portraitist, landscape painter, and followed her father into the medium of lithography. *Mary Jane Peale* (1827–1902), the only daughter of Rubens Peale, was actually his teacher in art, having acquired her own training from her uncle Rembrandt and from Philadelphia portraitist Thomas Sully.



FIGURE 3

Charles Willson Peale *The Peale Family*, c. 1770–1773 and 1809; Oil on Canvas, 56 1/2 x 89 1/2 inches, Collection of the New York Historical Society

The Peales Portrayed

The *Peale Family* by Charles Willson Peale of circa 1770–1773 and 1809 (FIG. 3) is a magnificent depiction of the first generation of the family with their youngest offspring. Charles, standing at his easel, is giving a drawing lesson to his seated brother St. George; standing next to Charles is his sis-

ter Margaret Jane and next to her, the family nurse Peg Durban. Seated next to St. George Peale is brother James; beside him is Charles's first wife Rachel with baby daughter Margaret; next is Charles's sister Elizabeth Digby Polk, then the artist's mother Margaretta, holding a granddaughter, who has been variously identified as Eleanor, Charles' third child or Elizabeth Bordley Polk, daughter of Elizabeth and Robert Peale. Charles Will-

son Peale's dog Argus is in the foreground. The busts on the shelf behind are inscribed B. West, C.W. Peale, and E. Jennings and were made by Charles Willson Peale when he was in London.

The Artist and His Family by James Peale (FIG. 4) takes the family portrait beyond simple group depiction into the realm of contemporary English fashion with the “conversation piece,” in which the interrelationship of the individuals depicted is accentuated by linking them through gesture, eye contact and pose. James and wife Mary Claypoole stand with linked arms in a forest glade. Their eldest daughter, Jane Ramsay clasps her mother’s hand and looks upward. Her younger siblings are behind her beneath their father’s outstretched hand. James, Jr., just 6 years old, kneels with sister Maria, age 8 years, who holds the year-old baby, Margaretta Angelica. With enthusiasm that suggests her later determination in the pursuit of an artistic career, 4 year-old Anna Claypoole rushes in to the family group. James and Mary’s fifth daughter, Sarah Miriam, also destined to become an artist, was not to be born for another five years.

FIGURE 4

James Peale *The Artist and His Family*, 1795
Oil on Canvas $31\frac{1}{4} \times 32\frac{3}{4}$ inches
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts,
Philadelphia
Gift of John Frederick Lewis



Still Life Painting

Most of the Peales painted still lifes at some point in their careers, but two — James and Raphaelle — truly mastered the art. Illusionistic displays of fruit or dessert confections, considered frivolous enterprises for artists of the early 19th century, were clearly intended to delight the senses, while their straightforward and striking presentations of such unadorned items as meat and

cheese (FIG.5) were especially daring for their time. In their near-photographic quality and poetic feeling, these mysterious tabletop still lifes served as one source of inspiration for a later school of Philadelphia still life painters. William Harnett and John Frederick Peto are the best-known exemplars of *trompe l'oeil* painting associated with Philadelphia at the end of the 19th century, but the achievements of other artists in that mode further attest to the legacy of the Peales. Contemporaries

such as Charles Bird King gave his painting *The Poor Artist's Cupboard* of 1822 not only a socially charged title but, a visually adroit *trompe l'oeil* representation. Acceptance of still life subject matter spread across the country and was pursued with success by later nineteenth-century painters such as African-American, Robert Duncanson, represented in the Corcoran's collection by a dreamy image of mounded fruit.



FIGURE 6
Margaretta Angelica Peale
Still Life with Watermelon and Peaches, c. 1828
Oil on canvas, 13 x 19 1/8 inches
Smith College Museum of Art
Purchased with funds given anonymously by a member of the Class of 1952

FIGURE 5
Raphaelle Peale
Culet and Vegetables, c. 1816
Oil on panel, 18 1/4 x 24 1/4 in.
The Schwarz Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The Land

Most studies of American art stress the seminal position of the artists associated with the Hudson River School in the history of landscape painting in the United States, and the achievements of artists such as Thomas Cole and Frederick Church should not be overlooked. Nor can their masterpieces, including Cole's *Departure* and *Return* and Church's *Niagara Falls*, all three in the Corcoran's permanent collection, be forgotten. But the foundations for their subject and an interest in the American land were laid by precursors including members of the Peale family. Both James and Charles Willson Peale executed landscape subjects early in their careers, but it was not until the last decades of their lives that the brothers concentrated on views of the region where they lived. Belfield, the farm owned by Charles Willson, and the banks of the Wissahickon Creek near Philadelphia provided a variety of views (FIG. 6). As with the subject of still life, the attention the Peales gave to landscape contributed to the development of an interest in the subject and laid a much needed foundation for those who would follow.

The Legacy

The exhibition focuses attention on the Corcoran's own outstanding collection of American paintings. Among the highlights of the show from the Corcoran's collection are Rembrandt Peale's immense *Washington Before Yorktown* of 1824-25 (FIG. 8) and James Peale's diminutive but delightful miniature portrait of *Marcia Burns Van Ness* (FIG. 7) of 1797. In the presentation of this exhibition at the Corcoran the Peales and their achievements are shown in a museum whose permanent collection includes some of the most important work by their contemporaries and followers. Indeed, few public collections of American paintings point up so dramatically the influence of these gifted individuals as that at the Corcoran, where other icons of American art — from the

charming portrait of *Mrs. Hugh McCurdy and her Daughters, Mary Jane and Letitia* by Joshua Johnston, the first recorded professional painter of African American descent, to William Harnett's *trompe l'oeil* masterpiece, *Plucked Clean* — speak clearly of the Peale legacy.

Further, for all the various Peale's individual successes and wide-ranging interests, this exhibition makes clear that family was, for each of these artists, a lifelong source of inspiration. Perhaps no works in the exhibition are as captivating as those that take as their subjects the Peales themselves. Family groups, portraits, and self-portraits convey a strong sense of self among all the various Peales, to be sure. But they also suggest a great joy of family life and a strong desire to honor deep affections through that timeless and most resonant of vehicles, art.



FIGURE 7
James Peale
Marcia Burns [Mrs. Peter] van Ness, 1797
Watercolor on ivory, 2 3/4 x 2 1/2 in.
The Corcoran Gallery of Art,
Gift of Mrs. Phillip Hinkle



SUPPLEMENT TO THE EXHIBITION

This remarkable exhibition concludes its tour in the nation's capital at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, a museum which has for more than 125 years been dedicated to "the American genius." To further celebrate the achievements of this "first family of American artists" the Corcoran has drawn additional Peale paintings from its own superb permanent collection and a few select loans from other museums, collectors and Peale family descendants. We are very grateful for the generosity of these lenders and thank them for sharing their cherished treasures with us.

FIGURE 8

Rembrandt Peale

Washington Before Yorktown, 1824-25

Oil on canvas, 139 x 121 inches

The Corcoran Gallery of Art,

Gift of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association

ADDITIONAL WORKS ON VIEW AT THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827)

Rebecca White c. 1783

Oil on canvas

22 1/4 x 19 inches

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund 66.14

James Peale 1749-1831

John White c. 1783

Oil on canvas

23 x 29 inches

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund 66.15

A.T. Kerr Esq. 1798

Watercolor on ivory

3 x 2 1/2 inches

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Bequest of Sarah A. Hagner 98.4

Portrait of a Gentleman 1817

Oil on canvas

35 3/4 x 27 3/4 inches

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund 51.24

Portrait of a Lady 1817

Oil on canvas

35 3/4 x 28 1/8 inches

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund 51.25

Still Life with Watermelon circa 1820

Oil on canvas

16 1/8 x 21 7/8 inches

Mr. and Mrs. Noel Wadsworth

Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse 1819

Oil on canvas

36 1/4 x 26 1/4 inches

Mr. Stiles Tuttle Colwill

Still Life (attributed) n.d.

Oil on canvas

16 1/8 x 22 1/8 inches

Mr. Stiles Tuttle Colwill

Charles Peale Polk 1767-1822

Thomas Corcoran 1802-1810

Oil on canvas

36 1/4 x 26 1/2 inches

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Gift of Katherine Wood Dunlap 47.14

Hannah Lemmon

(Mrs. Thomas) Corcoran 1802-1810

Oil on canvas

36 5/8 x 26 1/2 inches

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Gift of Arthur Hellen 47.15

David Hunter 1800

Oil on canvas

27 x 23 inches

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Gift on Miss Frances Washington Weeks and

Miss Nancy Hunter Weeks 60.21.1

Moses T. Hunter 1800

Oil on canvas

27 x 23 inches

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Gift on Miss Frances Washington Weeks and

Miss Nancy Hunter Weeks 60.21.2



FIGURE 9

Rembrandt Peale

Rubens Peale with Geranium, 1801

Oil on canvas, 28 1/4 x 24 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.;
Patrons' Permanent Fund

Anne Evelina Hunter 1800

Oil on canvas

27 1/4 x 23 1/4

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Gift on Miss Frances Washington Weeks and
Miss Nancy Hunter Weeks 60.21.3

Thomas Jefferson circa 1800

Oil on canvas

28 x 23 7/8 inches

Mr. Charles "Joe" Reeder

Raphaelle Peale (1774-1825)

Cutlet and Vegetables 1816

Oil on panel

18 1/4 x 24 1/4 inches

Schwarz Gallery, Philadelphia

Peaches circa 1817

Oil on panel

13 1/2 x 19 7/8 inches

Richard York Gallery, New York

Profile Portrait of Moses Williams

Cut paper

3 7/16 x 3 5/16 inches

The Library Company of Philadelphia

Rembrandt Peale 1778-1860

*Jacques Henri Bernardin de
Saint-Pierre* 1808

Oil on canvas

29 x 23 3/4 inches

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Gift of George W. Riggs 73.14

Count Charles-Philibert de Lasteyrie du Saillant
c. 1810

Oil on canvas

29 x 22 7/8 inches

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Gift of William Wilson Corcoran 69.50

Lt. Col. Joseph Outen Bogart c. 1822

Oil on canvas

36 x 28 inches

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Museum Purchase, Anna E. Clark Fund 57.14

Washington Before Yorktown 1824-25

Oil on canvas

139 x 121 inches

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Gift on the Mount Vernon Ladies Association 44.1

George Washington

Lithograph

21 5/8 x 16 inches

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Museum Purchase, Mary E. Maxwell Fund 49.34

Hugh McCurdy ca. 1795

Oil on canvas

36 1/8 x 27 1/4 inches

Mr. Carrington Williams

Harriet Cany (Mrs. Rembrandt) Peale

c. 1800-1869

Fruit Still Life c. 1850

Oil on canvas

17 1/8 x 27 inches

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

Museum Purchase, William A. Clark Fund 51.21

Rubens Peale (1784-1865)

From Nature in the Garden 1856

Oil on canvas

18 1/2 x 24 1/4 inches

Private Collection

Attributed to Moses Williams

George Washington 1802

Cut paper profile, embossed "Peale Museum"

(sight) 5 9/15 x 4 1/4 inches

Mr. Charles "Joe" Reeder

PEALE OBJECTS

Physiognotrace n.d.

Original machine wood and metal

20th century reconstruction after plans of Charles Willson Peale and John Isaac Hawkins

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, D.C.

Teacup and Saucer, Plate, and Bowl

nineteenth century, French

Unidentified maker

Porcelain with gold decoration

Mary C. Farley Krueger



FIGURE 10
Harriet Cany Peale
Fruit Still Life c. 1850
Oil on canvas
17 1/8 x 27 inches
The Corcoran Gallery of Art Museum Purchase,
William A. Clark Fund 51.21

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A fully illustrated catalogue, edited by Dr. Lillian B. Miller, the National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC, with essays by nine collaborators, is available in the Museum Shop.

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